

The Golden Compass



WORDS DAN JOLIN

❖❖❖ The Lord Of The Rings is the king of all fantasy franchises...

...But The Golden Compass, first part of a new trilogy from the same studio, means business. Meet the...

Pretender To The Throne

There is a theory posited by some physicists and cosmologists that our entire universe is just one of a possibly infinite number of parallel universes. Martin Rees, for instance, suggests that all these universes are clustered together like bubbles which form a vast foam of existence known as the "multiverse" – or, as theoretical physicist Leonard Susskind puts it, "megaverse". If true, this means that any outcome to any event, from the way cells divided in the murk of the primordial soup to what you ate for breakfast this morning, actually occurs in another, parallel reality.

So, in one such universe-"bubble", the Reformation never happened, the world is ruled by an oppressive Catholic institution known as The Magisterium, the Arctic is roamed by talking, armour-clad polar bears with opposable thumbs, and every human being's "soul" is manifested in animal form, known as a "daemon" (pronounced "demon"). This is the universe of *The Golden Compass*, as fans of the writings of Philip Pullman – himself a keen subscriber to the multiverse theory – will instantly recognise.

Meanwhile, in some other, more proximate

universe, there's a world very much like our own where Pullman's *Northern Lights* (the original published title of *The Golden Compass*) has been made into a movie at New Line studios as the first instalment in a possible film trilogy that the studio hopes will reap the same immense box-office as its *The Lord Of The Rings* films. Only the director is, bizarrely, Anand Tucker (*Hilary And Jackie*, *Shopgirl*), who, after getting the gig over the likes of Sam Mendes and Ridley Scott, *didn't* leave the project in 2006 citing creative differences.

Yet, as unlikely an alternate director as Tucker seems, that's on the surface at least no more a strange reality than the one we *do* happen to inhabit, in which, at the helm of this huge-budget, FX-intense, massively broad-scoped sci-fi/fantasy-franchise launcher, stands...

One of the guys who made *American Pie*.

When, towards the end of principal photography, *Empire* observes writer/director Chris Weitz at work on Shepperton's H Stage, he doesn't particularly strike us as a man who's wandered in from the wrong universe – even if he is helming for the first time without

The Golden Compass

Dakota Blue Richards
as Lyra Belacqua.



his brother Paul. His dark, hawkish features give him an air of focus that's appropriate for a man of such surprising intellectual depth. (Years before filming Jason Biggs slipping his penis into warm pastry, Weitz studied 17th century literature at Trinity College, Cambridge.) He may feel the weight of expectation exerted on his adaptation, but as he oversees an emotional farewell between his lead human actor, 12-year-old newcomer Dakota Blue Richards as pint-sized adventuress Lyra Belacqua, and lead CG-creation, gruff armoured bear Iorek Byrnison – here represented by something that looks like a trebuchet with a bear's head – it's clear he's comfortable with calling the shots on a much larger stage.

"Well, of course, the clear intro for the short news pieces on this movie has always been: 'From the guy who brought you pie-fucking'," Weitz notes wryly when we meet again some nine months later, sheltering from a very furious, very English rainstorm in a Soho café. "Or: 'Inexperienced and possibly totally unqualified director takes on extremely-difficult-to-make movie – will he screw up?'" *Empire* admits that Weitz's unorthodox, pie-to-polar bear career curve is something of a gift to a film writer. "Yeah, I get that angle," he sighs, before sipping a much-needed cappuccino. "But I feel a bit more qualified than I've been given credit for, just because at the heart of it this is a literary adaptation – albeit with a lot of bells and whistles – so to me it's kind of like what my brother and I did with *About A Boy*. It's about being true to the spirit of a book that I love."

With only four weeks to go, Weitz is currently striving to complete his mammoth task in

"I talked with Philip [Pullman] on a fairly regular basis to suss out whether what I had in mind made sense for his work." **Chris Weitz**

The Golden Compass

Released: December 26

Budget: \$180 million (approx.)

Director: Chris Weitz (*American Pie*, *Down To Earth*, *About A Boy*)

Based on the book... *Northern Lights* by Philip Pullman, the first in his *His Dark Materials* trilogy.

Starring: Dakota Blue Richards, Nicole Kidman, Daniel Craig, Sam Elliott, Eva Green

Story: In a parallel world ruled by the oppressive religious institution The Magisterium, a 12-year-old girl named Lyra (Richards) learns of her explorer Uncle Asriel's (Craig) plan to travel north and investigate the mysterious phenomenon known as "Dust". Meanwhile, children start disappearing on the streets of her hometown Oxford, taken from their families by the "Gobblers". When Lyra's best friend Roger is snatched away, Lyra plans to rescue him, her journey taking her northwards in her uncle's wake...

London, and his exhaustion is evident. Yet, when *Empire* later observes him in the edit suite, discussing a few troublesome studio notes with his editor Peter Honess and VFX supervisor Mike Fink, the atmosphere is relaxed, Weitz himself calm and thoughtful. In fact, he displays outright energy and almost boyish enthusiasm. Having walked over to a screening room to look over some CG effects shots and determine what final tweaks are required to all the virtual animal fur (they all look pretty finished to *Empire*'s untrained eye), he at one point becomes so impressed with the attention to detail that he springs ups from his couch and cries to the gathered VFX crew, "You guys rock! You're saving my ass!"

Weitz has been running on that energy for some time now. He first read Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy, of which *The Golden Compass* is part one, seven years ago, and describes himself as "stunned by their imagination, daring and intelligence". One of the main reasons Weitz connected with it was that, during his university studies, he fell for the 17th century poet John Milton, a major influence on Pullman's books. "They're not only inspired



Lyra struggles through the snow with Billy Costa (Charlie Rowe).

by Milton, but by a *specific passage* in Milton," Weitz explains, eyes a-gleam. "I mean, 'his dark materials' is this rather beautiful idea that God kind of left all these spare bits lying around and that, for all we know, there are other universes. And Pullman meshes that with string theory and theoretical physics stuff – not to mention Gnostic philosophy – which I am also really interested in."

New Line was clearly convinced that Weitz, however unlikely, was the right man for the job – the studio even rejected an adaptation they'd commissioned from no less a talent than Sir Tom Stoppard and asked Weitz to "start from scratch". (Weitz, a fan of Stoppard, deliberately chose not to read that first script, "lest I subconsciously poach things from him".)

What followed has been documented in previous *Empires*, but to summarise: Weitz delivered his script, understandably got cold feet about directing himself and the gig passed to Tucker. "I told them I thought Anand would do a great job, they disagreed, they let him go and asked me to come back," says Weitz.

Philip Pullman has made himself available to Weitz throughout the production, while respectfully keeping his distance from the adapted material. "I talked with Philip on a fairly regular basis," Weitz says, "to suss out whether what I had in mind made sense for his work. He's very adaptable and gracious about his stuff being adapted; he can recognise the difference between different media and genres; he's not precious about the details of his work but he's very protective of the spirit of his work – and he should be!"

All the filmmakers behind

The Golden Compass agree that the key element in ensuring that the movie keep to the spirit of the book is the character of Lyra. While the second and third novels (*The Subtle Knife* and *The Amber Spyglass*) bring in other characters and play out in different areas of the multiverse, including our own world, the first is very much the story of this wild, bold and deceptive urchin who embarks on a journey to rescue her friend Roger from the clutches of a mysterious child-snatching group known as the Gobblers. Along the way she discovers some shocking truths about her uncle, the scientific explorer Lord Asriel (Daniel Craig) and the enigmatic Mrs Coulter (Nicole Kidman), who early on appoints herself as Lyra's mentor. Not only that, it's suggested that she also has a rather mindblowing destiny: to bring an end to destiny.

It was agreed that Lyra would have to be played by an unknown, and Weitz was adamant that she be the right age and British. Four open-call sites were established in Cambridge, Oxford, Exeter and Kendal in April, 2006, and more than 10,000 girls turned up. The selection process was gruelling. "You have to put them through a bit of an obstacle course," says Weitz, "which isn't a lot of fun."

Throughout, Pullman was keen to know how the quest for Lyra was going. "He kept calling me," says producer Deborah Forte. "So I said to the casting agent, 'Just send him the DVD with the 40 kids that we selected from Cambridge. I mean, it's gonna take weeks to go through them and we have three other locations, so that'll keep him busy for a while.' Philip called me 48 hours later and said, 'It's one of two girls.' And one of them was Dakota Blue Richards. We continued looking for another month, making sure we'd turned over every stone, but he knew all along that he wanted Dakota."

For Weitz, Forte and Pullman, Richards was a perfect personality match for Lyra. "It was important that it be someone who really had a great sense of spirit and defiance," says Weitz, "and Dakota is a very strong-willed young lady who knows what she thinks, and that helps a lot."

While Richards herself agrees that "I'm quite like Lyra in some ways", she puts her success in the selection process down to something different: "Mum told me not to brush my hair that day because Lyra is always so wild and looks like she's been scavenging around or something. Maybe that is why they chose me..."

It's hard to imagine any alternate reality in the multiverse where the pristine, menacing Mrs Coulter is played by anyone other than Nicole Kidman. Pullman, who's been vocal in the past about his ideal casting choices (he once announced he'd like to see Jason Isaacs as Asriel and Samuel L Jackson as Texan astronaut Lee Scoresby – the latter role in the end taken by Sam Elliott), said from the start that the only person he could see in the role was Kidman.

"I first heard about Philip Pullman's books when I was working on *Birth*," says Kidman, "and one of the producers told me they'd acquired the rights and that the author was sending me



Nicole Kidman is Marisa Coulter

Sitting in her dressing-room trailer in the middle of nowhere – or, more specifically, about 100 kilometres from the outback town of Kununurra, in the far northern tip of Western Australia – Nicole Kidman nurses blisters on her feet as she steels herself to participate in a cattle drive on the set of Baz Luhrmann's ambitious period epic *Australia*. It's certainly a far cry from her days the previous year donning elegant dresses and fine furs as *The Golden Compass*'s refined, seductive Mrs Coulter.

"But this is what I love about being an actress," she says enthusiastically. "In *The Golden Compass* I play this woman in this fantastic imaginary world and then I have the balance of going to do a film like this where I play a woman in this very harsh, real world." As she pulls on her riding boots, Kidman suggests that she actually quite enjoys being out in the back of beyond. "There are times when you get corrupted by the business side of what we do, but I do far better when I'm away from anything to do with that and I just get to play!"

Which isn't to say her time playing Mrs Coulter was a trial. She enjoyed the fact that, despite being for a movie that is, on the surface, a "children's" film (easy, Pullman fans!), this role was the first in a while that let her be overtly sensuous. "I wanted her to have a sexuality," she says, "because that's a very strong part of the character: she's refined but she's also described in the book as magnetic."

You'd think that Coulter, who along with her creepy golden-haired monkey daemon is the villain of the piece, also allowed Kidman to explore her darker side, but she's reluctant to see the character in such a way. "I've obviously played characters before that have done despicable things, but rarely do you judge the character that you're playing. Nobody is born that way, so I had to fight to show the heart of the woman, because there is a heart and there are motives and reasons you discover as the story goes along."

Mrs Coulter's story doesn't end with *The Golden Compass*, of course, and, assuming the movie doesn't die at the box office, she will return for two further films – something she's looking forward to. "I really hope we get to do that," she says.

JUNE BARKER

Losing Their Religion

The Golden Compass *isn't the only movie with an atheistic undertone...*

2001: A Space Odyssey (1968)

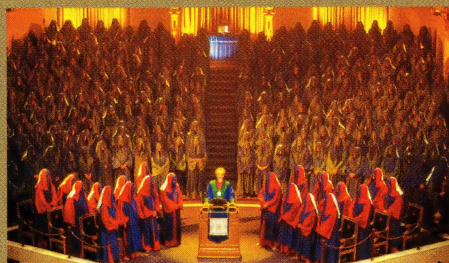
From the first scene involving primitive man-apes wielding tools, it's obvious that author Arthur C. Clarke battled for the Darwinists rather than the God squad – after all, the entire film's about evolution, and places man's destiny at the hands of alien intelligence, rather than God.

Hannah And Her Sisters (1986)

Everyone's favourite miniature neurotic laces most of his films with sly digs toward organised religion, but none more obvious than *Hannah And Her Sisters*. Here, Allen's character Mickey rummages through a pick'n'mix of religions, judging them on what they can offer before finding his answers in the movies of the Marx brothers...

Star Trek V: The Final Frontier (1989)

Gene Roddenberry's future was certainly a secular one, and in the poorest of the film series, the Enterprise crew search for God Himself – only to find the supposed deity is just a big alien. See also the character Q from the TV series: arguably a god, but just a particularly powerful (and mischievous) alien entity.



The Hitchhikers Guide To The Galaxy (2004)

Self-declared "radical atheist" Douglas Adams happily increased the anti-religious themes of his books for his script of the *Hitchhikers'* movie with the introduction of John Malkovich's nutty cult leader. And in one scene director Garth Jennings savvily places Richard Dawkins' *The Selfish Gene* in Arthur Dent's hand – fellow atheist Dawkins having been a good friend of Adams.

The Fountain (2006)

"I'm Godless," Darren Aronofsky has said, yet you'd be forgiven for interpreting *The Fountain* as a spiritual film. Aronofsky, however, puts it like this: "[It's] about this endless cycle of energy and matter, tracing back to the Big Bang. We're all just borrowing this matter and energy for a little bit, until it goes back into everything else, and that connects us all." So there you go.

CORIN DOUIEB



Icy: Nicole Kidman's Mrs Coulter stares down Dakota Blue Richards.

"I had a dream when reading [the books] that I'd play this part. So I rang up and said, 'What's happening with it?'" **Daniel Craig**

autographed copies of the three books because he didn't want anyone to play Mrs Coulter but me." She read and enjoyed the trilogy, but when Weitz approached her five years later, her initial response was to refuse. "The thing for me is that she's a villain and my thrust a lot of the time is that I don't mind playing characters that are complicated, but at this stage in my life now I'm looking to do things that are much more warm and fuzzy." Yet, with a bit of persuasion from Pullman himself ("He wrote me a gorgeous letter") she talked herself into it, reasoning that it would be cathartic to do something she'd originally resisted.

Daniel Craig – who Kidman says she recommended "as one of the best actors of his generation" after they "clicked" on sci-fi train wreck *The Invasion* – required no persuasion. A self-proclaimed fan of the books, he says, "I had this dream while reading them that I'd play this part, but it never came up. And then the production was delayed and it worked out perfectly because I'd just finished *Bond*. So I rang them up and said, 'What's happening with it?'"

When Empire suggests to
Craig that, despite being described as a fantasy

film, *The Golden Compass* doesn't look like a fantasy film, he beams. "Great!" he cries. "God, I might use that. Can I write that down?"

Empire's own tour of the Shepperton sets on this cold January day towards the shoot's end reveals a world vastly different from the misty, rough-hewn landscapes of Jackson's *Rings* trilogy, or even the crisp, preternaturally Christmassy otherworld of Andrew Adamson's *Narnia*. We find ourselves, for example, standing in Mrs Coulter's London chambers, which exhibit the sleek, graceful curves of art deco; if it wasn't for the disturbing oil portrait of a frosty-eyed Kidman caressing a malevolent golden monkey (Coulter's daemon), we could be standing in the room of a swish 1920s boutique hotel. Prop-master Barry Gibbs later proudly shows us a "spirit projector" from one of the film's early scenes, this being an intricate, highly polished brass contraption that Gibbs constructed from scratch using the production's own forge. Then a journey to a stunt-stage filled with crash mats reveals a system of pulleys and cables whereby the actors playing the witches – in Lyra's world a race of ageless, flying, bow-wielding women led by Eva Green's Serafina Pekkala – take to the air. Here we're also given an ear-splitting demonstration of the film's

Sam Elliott is Lee Scoresby.



historically obscure collection of antique firearms, from ornate Victorian carbines, to a hefty seven-barrelled rifle, to the kind of six-shooter you'd expect to find in a Western.

"We wanted to hybridise things," explains Weitz. "Like, I knew we didn't want to reinvent the gun. We didn't want steam cannons and steam rifles. Pullman isn't really about the visual specifics and details of his world. He's not like Tolkien in that, you know, Tolkien probably had in his mind the design of what the elvish codpiece of the Third Age looked like or something. Pullman's not a world-builder in that sense. He did at first say, 'Yes, I suppose the look is steampunk', but that's been done before in the likes of *The League Of Extraordinary Gentlemen* and *Van Helsing*. So our rule was that we would steal from any period and any look that felt good to us. There are elements that are really quite sci-fi – for instance, there's a carriage which looks like this crazy gyroscopic thing – but somehow that fits with the beautiful, hand-made 19th century rifle that Asriel carries."

The imperative to maintain an utterly fresh aesthetic atmosphere extends right through to the visual effects, and *The Golden Compass* won't exactly be light on those, whether they're rendering production designer Dennis Gassner's "metal-and-glass" vision of London, an entire armoured bear-on-armoured bear battle, or virtually every daemon featured in the story, including those of the children, which shapeshift constantly.

"This couldn't be more different to *The Lord Of The Rings* or *Narnia*," insists Weitz. "Philip Pullman's vision is unique. The main challenge was to imbue humanity and spirit into these special effects. We're not trying to wow people with the biggest explosion or try and create 15,000

Ores or what have you. Take the daemons: it's very important that these creatures in this film represent each person's soul, and are acted in concert with what our human actors are doing." This, as you'd expect, proved challenging for the actors, too. "To see Nicole Kidman acting opposite her soul, her soul's embodiment, which [*on set*] looks like a Schmoo hanging from a fishing rod is a really impressive thing to behold!" he laughs.

With pricey fx-shots in every scene, not to mention two of Hollywood's hottest actors in the cast, Weitz is playing with a lot of New Line's money. "A hundred and eighty million dollars," he says, ignoring the unwritten rule that filmmakers should *never* talk money, even ballpark figures. "It's a big buck – you could actually make a ballpark for that..."

Having such a big buck at stake, New Line is clearly highly protective of its investment. Hence the very deliberate marketing of *The Golden Compass* as the "follow-up" to *The Lord Of The Rings*. (Although Weitz states that that was actually *his* idea: "They're totally different but it's obvious that they operate on the same kind of scale, from the intimate to the cosmic – in fact, *His Dark Materials* is even more cosmic than *The Lord Of The Rings*.") Still, he has been forced to compromise at points. While sitting on the couch during the VFX finalising, he bemoans the fact that he had to lose a shot of Gyptian ship the Noorderlicht where the virtual camera swings upside-down because the studio deemed it "too confusing". He even had to make some casting changes. Originally, he'd cast Nonso Anozie as the voice of bear-king Iorek Byrnison, but New Line decided it would prefer a "name" in the role, and brought in none other than Gandalf.



Daniel Craig is Lord Asriel

When *Empire* sits down with Daniel Craig in an echoey function room within Cannes' Majestic hotel, we comment innocently that, with his full grey-flecked beard, he's looking distinctly more "mature" than when we last saw him, on-screen in *Casino Royale*. "Because of my beard?" he exclaims, rubbing the face-fuzz. "Does it make me look older? Damn!"

It would seem that's the only complaint he has about playing Lord Asriel, one of the main players in Philip Pullman's trilogy, a distinguished, iron-willed adventurer who scuffs the line between hero and villain and whose own quest (we'll not give away his ultimate aim here) interweaves with that of the books' young heroine, Lyra. After all, not only is Craig a huge fan and proponent of the books, the production's also whisked him off to some spectacular locations.

"Thankfully we've managed to grab more money out of the studio and put scenes in which were originally taken out because of budget," he enthuses. "We've been up in Switzerland shooting on a glacier, and it's just been amazing. It's the best part of my job." Of course, much of the rest of the work did involve acting in a green-screen environment with, as Craig describes it, "a lot of people running across the set with green bags and sort of throwing them across the room." Did it ever bother him having to share every single scene with a non-existent animal – his character's daemon – which would be digitally inserted later? "Well mine's a snow leopard, so I'm all right with it. Recently there was some fantastic footage of one on a David Attenborough program [*Planet Earth*]. It's stunning. I don't have a problem with that!"

What you could imagine him having a problem with, though, is the fact that he's now contracted himself into not one, but two massive franchises; as well as the possible future *His Dark Materials* instalments, he has at least one other Bond movie to fit in. "It's the first time that this has happened in my life," he says of this sudden flurry of activity. "But it seems silly not to sign up for something that I believe in. I believe in Bond, and I believe in this. I know I've got a busy time ahead of me, but that's okay. Got to pay the bills!"

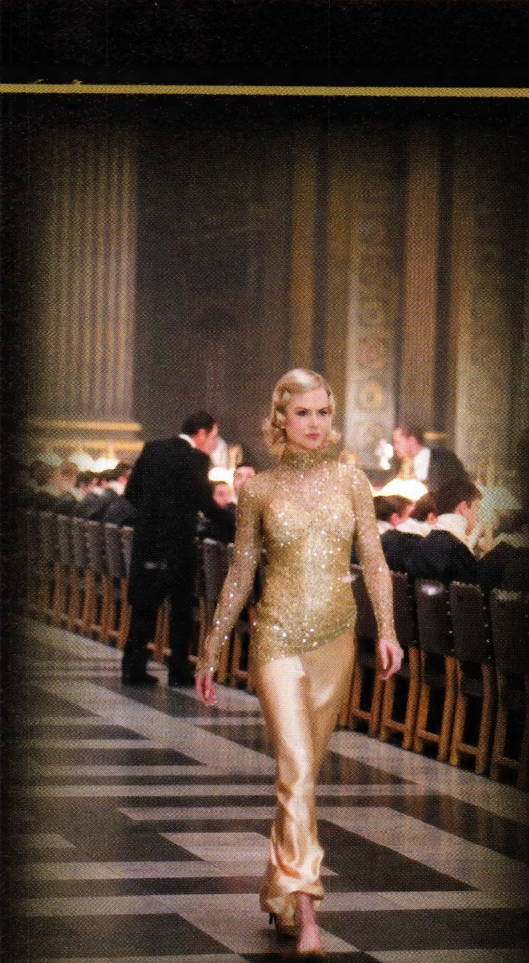


Lyra Belacqua: saves universe, needs to learn table manners.

Next Lord Of The Rings or next best thing?

The Golden Compass versus The Fellowship Of The Ring: we stack up the stats to see how His Dark Materials compares with that other fantasy trilogy...

	<i>The Golden Compass</i>	<i>Fellowship Of The Ring</i>
Estimated Budget	\$180,000,000	\$93,000,000
Total Running Time	Predicted 2hrs 30min	2hrs 58min
Length Of Production	15 months	Approx 16 months
Production Ethos	Just make the first one and hope it makes enough to warrant the sequels, which will be shot back-to-back.	Shoot entire trilogy in one go, doing film-specific reshoots between releases.
Copies Of The Trilogy Sold	10 million	100 million
Book Awards	Carnegie Medal (1995), Whitbred Book Of The Year (2001), Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award (2005).	International Fantasy Awards (1957), Amazon's Book of the Millennium (2002), Big Read Nation's Best Loved Book (2003), Australian Broadcasting Corporation's Best Book (2004).
Adaptation Authenticity	There's a concern that the adaptation will soft-pedal Philip Pullman's atheistic message, although that doesn't really come to the fore until the next instalments.	Fans considered it faithful, but some bemoaned the excision of the Tom Bombadil episode.
Pressure On Protagonist	Lyra has the fortunes of the entire multiverse at stake.	Frodo only has to save Middle-earth.
Beardiness (Empire estimate)	37%	52%
Accessories	"Alethiometer", a compass that reveals the truth about past and present events.	Ring that turns you invisible. And evil.



Not your everyday fantasy female: Nicole Kidman.

"Letting go of Nonso, who is one of the most promising and soulful young actors I have encountered in England, was one of the most painful experiences on this movie for me," says Weitz. "But if you're gonna change it to anybody, you wanna change it to Ian McKellen. You know, in something like this you win some and lose some. I think even Peter Jackson won some and lost some. But Peter was in New Zealand and it was harder to get to him..."

New Line must also be well aware that letting Weitz faithfully realise Pullman's vision potentially raises its own problems. *His Dark Materials* is well-known for its overriding anti-religious sentiment, and Pullman is unafraid to describe himself as an atheist – he's even gone on record attacking C.S. Lewis's *Narnia* books, to which his own have been contrasted, as "a peevish blend of racist, misogynistic and reactionary prejudice". Even though the specific knocking of organised religion doesn't become overt until the second and third books, the first does set up the church of Lyra's world as a tyrannical institution which is willing to perform atrocities to maintain its stranglehold on society. Not something, you'd imagine, that would play well in those fervently Christian American hotbeds which helped turn the likes of *The Lion, The Witch And The Wardrobe* and *The Passion Of The Christ* into such hits. And it's hard to imagine any film studio releasing a blockbuster that will brazenly invite backlash from any significant domestic demographic.

Weitz, naturally, is all-too-well aware of this.

"The pressure *vis-à-vis* the domestic market is really financial, in terms of actually just making a movie that enough people are going to want to go and see. Because, obviously, as you can tell, my interest in the books is with all their wonderful intellectual content. The fans will want to kill me for two things: if I don't capture the sense of the world, and if they feel I've betrayed the intellectual conceit of the books.

"New Line doesn't want to make the biggest art film ever," he laughs. "And in some ways they'd be glad if the whole religious thing just never happened. But that's not the way I wanna do it." However, Weitz has already been accused of soft-peddalling the books' atheistic tendencies. "Yeah, unfortunately, early on, I gave an interview in which I said what I thought were some fairly innocuous things about this subject and was dragged over the coals for it. But here is my honest answer to this: first of all, I think the people who see Pullman's work as a kind of atheist fantasy are wrong. I think it's terribly spiritual. I think that Pullman has major problems with *any* form of organised oppression, be it a church hierarchy or Soviet rule. I have taken great pains to interweave those elements so that those people who read Pullman for his philosophical content will be satisfied, if they're willing to look carefully. I'm playing a game. I'm walking a fine line. And I think I've walked it. I have no intention of deliberately insulting or offending anyone or their beliefs. That said, okay, so there's a risk. But I don't think people in the States are gonna lose their minds over this quite as much as one might think."

While showing confidence that they will eventually return to film *The Subtle Knife* and *The Amber Spyglass*, no one involved is sure that's a definite. Unlike *The Lord Of The Rings*, which the studio funded as a whole package then chopped into three releases, *The Golden Compass* has no locked-in sequels, and no footage for further movies has yet been shot. Although...

"What was going to be the end of this movie will now be the beginning of the *second* movie," Weitz reveals. "It leaves us with a better cliffhanger on the first movie, and it also kind of allows us to make the first book's end the inciting incident of the second movie. That was a tough decision to make – theoretically the fans could crucify me – but I think it was the right one to do."

So it would seem that, assuming Pullman's boldly singular vision doesn't prove too perplexing for a mass audience, and the phantom flames of controversy don't completely burn the profits, we *are* being primed for sequels. But will Weitz – who admits that on every film he's ever done he's thought, I'm never gonna direct a movie again – return? "I have the first shot at it if New Line wants me," he says. "Frankly it's up to them. They're my employers. We'll see if they enjoyed the experience of working with me or not. But first of all people have to decide whether they want to go and see *this* film!"

► **The Golden Compass is released on December 26 and will be reviewed in a future issue.**



Dakota Blue Richards is Lyra Belacqua

While Dakota Blue Richards doesn't have quite as much weight bearing down on her slim, 12-year-old shoulders as her character, Lyra – the fortunes of a movie franchise are not entirely comparable with the spiritual fate of every creature in existence – it does seem rather much for one so young to heft. In this first instalment of New Line's *His Dark Materials* trilogy, the plucked-from-obscure (or rather, Sussex) actress with no previous experience beyond school productions appears in almost every scene, either acting opposite an A-list star or, as she puts it, "a green stick for an eye line or a puppeteer on stilts with a bear's head". Assuming we get to see adaptations of Parts Two and Three, she'll be required to guide Pullman's meta-epic all the way to Heaven's gate, a mammoth task that'll see her blowing out 16 candles before the whole trilogy's in the can. It's a big commitment. But she doesn't seem bothered.

"I do wonder what it will be like," she ponders of the prospect of seeing Lyra's story all the way through to the bittersweet end. "I think it will be good. It will be exciting." And then, revealing an astute sense of practicality, she adds, "I'm not worried about the schooling thing because I'll get a private tutor on set..." Richards confesses that it wasn't so much the desire to act that drew her to the auditions than the simple appeal of *being* Lyra, a character she came to love through bedtime readings and then via the National Theatre's elaborate stage production. "I always liked acting but never thought I'd actually be an actress," she says. "I don't want to be a full-time actress. I want to do acting but have a job as well. Like being a teacher or a vet."

Even so, she's gone straight on to another movie, playing 13-year-old 19th Century orphan Maria in *The Secret Of Moonacre*, Gabor Csupo's adaptation of the Elizabeth Goudge novel *The Little White Horse*. Perhaps she couldn't resist the perks; after all, she says gleefully, "they gave me an Alethiometer. I have two things to remind me of the [Golden Compass] set: the Alethiometer, and P!" P? Richards giggles. "I saw this skull and fell in love with it. I was going to call it Percy, but me and my friend decided we should call it 'P', because the rest of him is missing."